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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 YEREVAN 000209

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/CARC, NSC FOR MARIA GERMANO

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [AM](#)
SUBJECT: VOICES FROM ARMENIA'S FREEDOM SQUARE: IT'S NOT
ABOUT LTP, IT'S ABOUT TAKING BACK OUR COUNTRY

REF: A. YEREVAN 164

[1](#)B. YEREVAN 161

[1](#)C. YEREVAN 160

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Classified By: CDA Joseph Pennington, reasons 1.4 (b,d).

[1](#)1. (U) This cable was mostly drafted late February 29, before police cleared the protesters from Freedom Square March 1, and the subsequent chaos. After some thought, we have decided to transmit it anyway, as a small window into what continues to be an important constituency.

SUMMARY

[1](#)2. (C) Emboff visited Freedom Square February 28 to gauge protesters' views of the unfolding situation. The standoff between ex-president Levon Ter-Petrossian (LTP) and Armenian authorities had entered its ninth day of protests, 36 hours before police cleared the square. More than a few protesters at the square on February 28 admitted they were not LTP supporters at all, but attending the rallies to "save our country." For many, the protests had morphed from a rejection of falsified election results into what they deemed a principled stand against Armenia falling irretrievably under the arbitrary rule of a clique of kleptocrats. Some considered the flawed election a personal insult to their dignity. Protesters at the time expressed confidence that the authorities would not resort to force, but warned of a massive popular backlash if they did. LTP loyalists also expressed certitude that in a newly held election, their candidate would win hands down, now that the Armenian people had seen "the regime" for what it truly is. END SUMMARY.

"THIS IS OUR LAST CHANCE"

[1](#)2. (C) On February 28, Emboff visited Freedom Square to speak with Armenian citizens attending around-the-clock protests initiated by LTP to dispute the results of the February 19 presidential election that controversially went to Prime Minister Serzh Sargsian. During several hours of discussions, Emboff spoke with husband-and-wife LTP supporters who had served as election day proxies (registered candidate representatives/observers in a polling station) in the northern city of Stepanavan; a recently fired Armenian diplomat who used to head the Americas Division at the MFA

before she and five of her colleagues publicly denounced the conduct of the election; and a dozen elderly and middle-aged Armenian citizens -- some of whom did not vote for LTP -- who had been attending the afternoon portion of protests on a daily basis. Some of these individuals had spent multiple nights on sub-freezing Freedom Square, maintaining all-night vigils around bonfires and catching up on sleep during the day. Unshaven and unfazed about the risks they were taking to support the protests, almost all said they were doing so "to save" their country.

13. (C) Karine Afrikian, the former Head of the Americas Department at the MFA who was fired by FM Oskanian on February 25 for having publicly denounced the conduct of the February 19 presidential election with five of her MFA colleagues, told Emboff the protests were Armenia's "last chance" to salvage any hopes for democracy that people had after the country gained independence in 1991. She despaired that "we can't lose," or else Armenians "would lose our country." Elderly protesters echoed her sentiment, stating they were attending the daily protests to "save our country" from corruption and the perpetuation of a perceived corrupt regime. If Armenians let the vote stand as is, one middle-aged man said, then "Robert's son and Serzh's relatives" will take over after "Serzh." One woman said "we are here to say 'no' to the regime."

"WE'LL LEAVE THE COUNTRY"

14. (C) Both Afrikian and two of the elderly protesters said that if LTP lost the current battle with authorities, there would be no sense in staying in Armenia, and that "we'll leave the country." Afrikian noted that her decision to denounce the elections meant she would never be given a government job again -- at least while the current regime was in control. She had confided to Emboff the evening before on

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the square that she and her colleagues had felt compelled to denounce the elections and support the "courageous" stand taken by three Armenian ambassadors and a deputy foreign minister who had also publicly refuted the election results and were promptly fired. (NOTE: Since March 1, half a dozen Armenian citizens have approached the Embassy to request political asylum in the United States. Anecdotal reports also suggest that some citizens have departed Armenia for Georgia and Russia in the wake of the violence. Many civil society representatives have also begun to speak of emigration. END NOTE.)

THE YOUNG GENERATION WILL BE LOST

15. (C) Echoing concerns expressed by others on the square, Afrikian warned that a perpetuation of the ruling regime, and its kleptocratic ways, would spawn outmigration of talented youth and doom those youth who stay to living in a criminalized society. She stated that bright youth were disaffected with society, and continued to look overseas to realize their aspirations, as they had since Armenian independence. But what she found more dangerous was the fact that the youth who stayed in Armenia would become resigned to living in a "criminalized" society where they "won't have any chance" to survive but by adapting to the system.

TURNING ARMENIANS INTO "ASSES"

16. (C) The middle-aged husband-wife LTP supporters from Stepanavan stressed that the presidential election was no longer just about "Serzh versus LTP." "We have a right to have normal elections," they exclaimed, and the authorities

do not have the right "to turn the entire Armenian population into asses." The couple, one of whom served as LTP's election proxy on election day, said "we saw" what the authorities did on election day, using violence, intimidation, and ballot box stuffing to take the vote. The wife said she didn't want Armenia to "return to the times" of the Soviet Union. "If we accept the results," she said, "we won't be normal people."

CONFIDENT OF NO VIOLENCE

¶17. (C) Almost all of the protesters expressed confidence that the authorities would not resort to force to end the protests. They said doing so would be a huge blunder that would create a popular public backlash. The LTP proxy from Stepanavan said "we have the moral high ground," and that they were conducting the protests peacefully while exhausting all of the legal options afforded them by Armenia's constitution. When asked what would happen if the authorities tried to sideline LTP -- whether legally or not -- the elderly people Emboff spoke with said they would still come to the square, "as would others."

¶18. (C) The wife of the LTP proxy from Stepanavan was less certain that violence would be avoided. She said she worried for her two college-age children who came to the protests after classes, and for others. Afrikian said she spent the first two nights on the square and feared the worst. But she said she respected the courage LTP was showing by standing up to the authorities, and thought that only a leader "who is unafraid, and willing to risk it all," could help set Armenia back on a democratic course.

AUTHORITIES RAMP UP THE PRESSURE ...

¶19. (C) The Stepanavan couple and Afrikian said the authorities were upping their pressure on loyalists around the country and within the government to stamp out any possible or real LTP sympathies. According to the Stepanavan LTP proxy, as of the morning of February 28 on roads leading out of Stepanavan and Vanadzor, road police were still stopping vehicles and questioning people on their travel plans and destination. "We are getting through," he laughed, "by saying we are Serzh supporters." Some of the elderly said Public TV was a disgrace for its virtual media blackout on the protests, saying the country did not know what was transpiring in the square. Almost all said they were

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relaying the news to distant relatives by cell phone, and that where once they had been politically apathetic were now being harangued by calls for updates nonstop. Afrikian said colleagues of hers in various ministries had reported feeling a Soviet-era chill of repression in the last week, with employees afraid to express their views on the current situation. She said some colleagues had complained to her that they had been forced to sign a declaration they would attend president-elect Sargsian's February 26 rally in Republic Square.

... BUT LTP WILL EASILY WIN NEW ELECTION

¶10. (C) The protesters said they were virtually certain LTP would win a newly held presidential election. The LTP Stepanavan proxy declared the political calculus had changed now that Armenians fully grasped the extent of the "stolen" election, and seen "the regime" for what it truly is. He predicted that those Sargsian loyalists who had committed dirty tricks on election day now knew -- and feared -- that they could not get away with such chicanery a second time.

"The people will be watching," he grinned confidently, and "the pressure will be on them" to not interfere in a new election. Afrikian seconded this line of thinking, saying the falsification of the election had consolidated new supporters for LTP, who would reap a larger, more bona fide protest vote against the ruling regime.

PENNINGTON